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Remarks in a roundtable discussion on the work-study program in Des Moines, Iowa. (President Bill Clinton speech) (Transcript)

February 11, 1996

Sally Hinders, assistant provost for career services, Drake University, welcomed the President and introduced the participants, one of whom indicated that he was from Winterset, IA, site of the "Bridges of Madison County."]

The President. They should have given you the role. Laughter

Ms. Hinders discussed some of the advantages of the work-study program at Drake University, indicating that students who participate tend to become more involved in the Drake community and often use their experiences as stepping stones to other opportunities. She then asked the President to talk about the program.]

The President. Well, let me begin by thanking all of you for taking some time on a Sunday afternoon to do this. I'm delighted to be here, delighted to be at Drake.

Since I became President I've worked hard to try to increase access to colleges and universities for young people because it's obvious that more need to be able to go and more need to be able to stay. And I never will forget when I was Governor I had an encounter one night with a number of students in Fayetteville, which is the hometown of the University of Arkansas, and I just stopped in a little place, drank a cup of coffee. And there were several students there, and I talked to two of them of the group there who had actually dropped out of school once already because they were afraid they couldn't afford the cost of staying in. They were worried about whether they could get the proper students loans, whether they could get any scholarships, whether they would ever be able to pay back their loans.

So I began to work on it when I was a Governor, things we could do at State level. And when I ran for President I had a commitment to try expand opportunities for college going. And essentially what we have

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So far is to put the Pell grant program back on track - it was in serious trouble - passed a national service program, which this year has 25,000 young people in it earning money for college tuition while doing community service; and to expand loan options so that more young people could have the option to pay their loans back as a percentage of their income when they get out if they take a job that wouldn't permit them to make what would be the normal commercial repayment schedule. And that would mean no one would ever have to forgo borrowing money because they would always be able to handle the loan repayment.

And then in the State of the Union Address I recommended, as you pointed out, that we have a 50-percent increase in the work-study program, to get up to a million students a year in work-study because we haven't kept up over the years in work-study with the demand, with increasing enrollment. And I also believe that the cost of college tuition up to \$10,000 a year ought to be deductible, which I believe would be - from my point of view, it's the best kind of tax cut you could have because you'd be giving a tax reduction to people who are investing either in themselves or their children and, therefore, making a big investment in our common future.

But the work-study program is of real interest to me because I worked myself through college; I worked myself through law school. I don't believe I would have made it if I hadn't had the jobs. And I also have observed just what you said, that a lot of young people actually do better when they have a work experience to go with their schooling. So I'm hoping to persuade the Congress to adopt this increase in work-study, even though in general we're reducing the budget. And we will offer to the Congress a way to do this consistent with our need to balance the budget in 7 years. So this won't bust the budget or anything, but it will help a lot more people to go and then to stay in college.

Let me just make one other point on that. I'm very encouraged that the college-going rate in our country is still going up, but I am not encouraged that it has started to fall again in the last 2 or 3 years among people whose incomes are in the lowest 20 percent of our economy. And if you think about it, the whole sort of premise, or promise, of America from our earliest immigrants is that hard working parents would be able to open more opportunities to their children. So it's not a good thing that we have that happening.

So one of the things I hope will happen out of the whole combined impact of all these proposals is that young people who come from families with very modest incomes will start increasing their college-going again, just like the rest of our country.

s. Hinders introduced some work-study participants, the first of indicated that the program was a stepping stone to an internship

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that throughout the experience her employers were supportive of her efforts. A parent indicated that her daughter would not be at a private university were it not for the work-study program and that, while her husband's job as a teamster was not always stable, they never had to worry about their daughter's education.]

The President. Well, let me say I know that Drake has made a real effort to hold down the tuition, too, so that more people will be able to afford to go. And I just spoke to the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Washington a couple days ago, and I tried to cite the number of schools that were doing that. I think more and more schools are trying not to just get caught in a vicious cycle where they have to raise tuition and then they have to find more aid, then they have to do more work-study.

I'd just like to remind everybody - I know all of you around this table know this, but the American people who are watching us and citizens of Iowa who are watching us, this is not - this should not be viewed as a social program. This is an investment in our future. The taxpayers make out big time on this investment. We get a whole lot more back out of all of you because you're going to have college degrees, because you're going to be able to live out your own dreams, because you're going to be able to do what you wish to do.

and not just financially. This is not entirely a money issue. There's also - our society is a better place when people find more personal fulfillment in the work that they do. So it is a financial issue, but it's also much more of a moral and social issue. It knits us together more strongly when more people have a chance to develop their God-given abilities.

I personally believe that we don't make any better investments than this. And almost 100 percent of people like you in your position will pay back to the Government far more in increased taxes than you ever took out in student loans or Pell grants or work-study funds or anything else. And I think that's an important thing for the American people to remember, that this is an investment with a big-time return.

Another participant said that the program had reduced the burden on his family, and it gave him a greater appreciation for education and a career.]

The President. Your son spoke very well.

The student's father said the work-study program had helped both his sons, teaching them to work harder toward their goals. Another participant said that a family member had faced medical problems that diminished family financial resources, but that Drake had been able to put together a financial aid package which allowed him to go to

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ool and help pay for his education.]

The President. How many hours a week on average do all of you work?

Q. About 10, 11.

The President. About 10, 11? About the same for everybody? And do you all find that it doesn't undermine your studies?

The student said that the program made her work harder, set a schedule, and keep to it. Another indicated that it helped them mature. Work-study student Molly Adams said that it increased her sense of responsibility and went on to explain her work with the Grace United Methodist Church and how it helped the community in Des Moines.]

The President. Marilyn, what percentage of Molly's pay comes from the Government, and what percentage do you have to come up with?

Marilyn Adams. Isn't it one-third and a third? I think that's right - 25 and 75.

The President. So your church pays for 25 percent? So it's the same as with the college, then?

. Correct.

The President. Because when you employ people it's 75-25, isn't it?

Q. Correct.

The President. So do you have to allocate work-study slots off-campus, is that how it works?

Q. Correct. We're supposed to spend 5 percent of our overall allocation on off-campus studies.

The President. Does the law limit you to 5 percent?

Q. No.

The President. So it's Drake policy? Or is it Department of Education policy? If you wanted to have - if a college or university wanted to place 25 percent of the work-study people off-campus, could they do so?

Q. As far as I know we could, if we could find the places and the students to work there.

The President. And what percentage of your students are on :-study?

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. About 75 percent of our students who receive financial aid go ahead and accept their work award and work.

Q. And I can add to that, about 80 percent of our students receive some form of financial aid.

The President. So a majority do this, are on some sort of work-study.

Q. Oh, yes.

The President. Now, if you had more positions, could you fill them?

Several participants indicated their willingness to take more work-study positions. Ms. Hinders discussed matching funds and indicated that Drake contributes additional money because they like the work-study program.]

The President. Now, I saw in the notes I was given before I came in here that the students make between \$4.65 an hour and \$7.00, but mostly nearer \$4.65 than \$7.00. But what would you say the average pay is? Between \$4.65 and \$5.00 an hour?

Q. Right around \$5.00, yes.

The President. What determines the pay, the ability of the match or the nature of the job, or what?

One participant said it was the nature of the job; another said supply and demand play a part, but some positions require very specialized skills and the wages go up a little bit in order to be competitive with the marketplace. Another participant said that Drake University overspends the matching funds and really spends more like 50 percent.]

The President. Really?

Q. Lots of students coming in and out every day are involved with those positions. And they're quite varied as well.

The President. But you would - anyway, I take it that - you all agree then that there is a demand for more work-study positions, and if we could go - one million a year is our goal, and that basically costs - it would be about a 50-percent increase from where we are now.

Ms. Hinders said that those are the kinds of opportunities that students and parents are really looking for. Employers and work-study students then described their programs.]

The President. Let me ask you something, you're a freshman?

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. Yes.

The President. That's one thing I wanted to ask. How do you deal with the demand - if the demand exceeds the supply, do you give any preference to older students or is it strictly by income, by need, without regard to class?

Ms. Hinders explained that Drake University begins with need-based students but said that it is a part of the financial aid program. She then introduced the director of the university's financial aid program who said that work-study was a cornerstone of the financial aid program and that it was a win-win situation for all involved.]

The President. I also think the value that the students give you - Erica mentioned that just the work experience, working with older people in a good environment. It's amazing how quickly young people mature and to take a responsibility.

You know, it's a funny thing, when the Government was shut down - which wasn't too funny - laughter - but when it was shut down there were days when the whole White House was practically being run by the interns. Laughter It was amazing. There were probably four of us with gray hair - laughter - and the rest of it, the kids were sort of running the show. And they did a great job. I mean, they worked hard; they kept the basic functions open. They worked quite well the first time we were shut down, and we didn't have everything covered by the budget.

It just reminded me again of how important it is to give young people that experience, too. It sort of binds the community and the society together in very important ways.

Ms. Hinders. Well, very much so. I know that we're running a little bit short on time.

The President. Tom, you want to say something?

Senator Harkin thanked all the participants and mentioned that he was the only Senator to sit on both the committee for higher education and the appropriations committee, and in the last Congress was chairman of the appropriations committee.]

The President. I hope you will be again.

Senator Harkin. Well, I hope so. Laughter By the way, Rebecca, as I told you, is doing a great job for me. The youngest person I've every had in that - the position of being the scheduler is a tough position.

The President. It's the worst job in an office.

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Senator Harkin said that during his years on the education committee the commitment to education had declined year after year and indicated that was particularly true of Pell grants and college work-study programs. He concluded by saying that the President supports these programs and that he hoped that interest rates on student loans would remain low.]

The President. I think that's quite important. I think it's been underestimated, the impact of not having that interest accumulate until people have been out a few months.

Q. Definitely.

The President. Let me just also say, to follow up on what Senator Harkin was saying, and to try, to put it in some larger political context - for the last 30 years anyway, by and large, education has not been a particularly partisan issue. We've had broad bipartisan support for these things until just recently.

And I hope we can get it back, because this is - this big philosophical debate going on in Washington, if you believe the Government is the problem and is the reason for all of our ailments as a society, then you think people are better off if you just get the deficit down, have a strong defense and let people manage for themselves. If you believe that we're stronger as a country, when we deal with our common problems in a common fashion, we will work together on them, then it's obvious that things that have a big-ticket cost, like a national work-study program, require some involvement with the National Government.

And as I said, these are really matters that historically have not been, at least in my lifetime, the last 30 years, have not been really matters of much partisan debate. But what has happened in the last, sort of, decade, there's been this sort of head of steam built up behind the notion that Government per se was bad. Not dumb regulations, or an ill-advised program, or a bad tax system, or whatever, but just the whole idea of Government was intrinsically - something wrong with it. And I basically don't agree with that.

I think what's happened is we need - all organizations have to become less bureaucratic, less rule-oriented, more oriented toward empowering people to solve their own problems. And Government's like that, too, but we cannot meet our educational obligations unless there is a public, broad-based, national commitment to helping you do what you do here at the grassroots level.

And actually, one thing I like about the work-study program is it's idea of what it ought to be - we say, okay, here's a national problem; we need more young people going to college, but it costs a lot

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go and most people can't afford to go. Okay? Here's the national solution: We should give money to help that happen. But we don't tell you how to do it. In other words, that's the way the Federal Government ought to operate more. We say - we set a national goal. We provide some resources to meet that goal. We ask you to make a contribution as well. Then you get to decide how. We all agree on the what, nationally, and then you define the how at Drake. And at the University of Iowa, they might define it in an entirely different way. I mean, that's the way this country ought to work, where people work together in that fashion.

I just sat here and made a list of the seven people I worked for in college and law school. Laughter It's quite interesting. I was thinking, more than half of them I still hear from, I still have a relationship with and I still feel enormously indebted to because they gave me a chance to get my education. I was sitting here thinking about it while you all were talking. Laughter

Ms. Hinders. Well, as we draw to a close, Senator Harkin, do you have any additional comments that you'd like to add?

Senator Harkin. Do you have any students in the Head Start program?

Q. We do.

Senator Harkin. You do?

Q. Yes.

Senator Harkin. Good for you.

Ms. Hinders. This has been a pleasure to have you here today, Mr. President. We have enjoyed coming together as a group to talk to you about an issue that we really have a passion for. And we can tell that you do, too. So, on behalf of Drake and our entire community, thank you.

The President. Thank you, and good luck to all of you.

NOTE: The roundtable began at 12:45 p.m. in the Knapp Center at Drake University.

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